

Introduction

Coups d'État in Cold War Latin America, 1964–1982

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The last wave of coups d'état in Latin America shaped today's reality in the region. If it's true that to comprehend the present one must analyze the past, then the years covered in this book are the past that enables comprehension of the present. A coup d'état consists in the unconstitutional replacement of the incumbent executive by military officers or civilians supported by the armed forces and is often accompanied by the suspension of civil guarantees and liberties as well as the nullification of legislative power. Although such political interventions were not new, the late Cold War military regimes were distinguished by three factors: the coup leaders' ambitious objectives to reorganize society; the incidence of the Cold War in underpinning their rationales for intervention; and, in many cases, unprecedented levels of state terror.

Coups d'État in Cold War Latin America develops a methodology to facilitate comparison between different national cases. Unlike other edited volumes, this is not a collection of independent essays. Instead, we standardized a set of research questions that each author was compelled to answer, enabling comparison between cases. Every chapter in this volume is an original contribution. Along with our contributors, we analyze the primary causal forces that culminated in a series of coups d'état that swept the hemisphere, focusing on Brazil (1964), Bolivia (1964), Peru (1968), Honduras (1972), Uruguay (1973), Chile (1973), Argentina (1976), El Salvador (1979), and Guatemala (1982). Placing so many distinctive national processes in the same frame is a task that only multiple specialists can undertake collaboratively.

Hence this book is organized around a series of questions. When was a given transfer of power defined as a coup d'état? What were the

objectives, both explicit and implicit, in overthrowing an existing regime? What role did the US government play? What were the roles of local political actors? What were the various options considered by different sectors within each country? What kinds of resistance did the protagonists of the coups face? What were their sources of support? Responding to these questions for each national case, *Coups d'État in Cold War Latin America* evaluates the end of an era in the subcontinent, enabling a better understanding of the foundations upon which Latin American societies began constructing the democratic regimes that continue today.

ECONOMIC UNDERPINNINGS

One way of understanding the Cold War in Latin America is as a battle over different visions of society and citizenship. What did it mean to be legally equal as citizens while living in the world's most unequal societies? A new generation of social scientists, workers and peasants, students, Catholic progressives, and even some military officers brought distinct answers to this question. By the end of the Cold War, their dreams were shattered, economic inequality increased, and the region faced a debt crisis that it navigated by deregulating its markets and privatizing public assets.

But the principal battle lines of the Cold War cannot be understood without placing them within the context of a longer struggle for economic equality and political recognition in Latin America. Between 1880 and the stock market crash of 1929, Latin America benefited from new developments in transportation and communication technologies, connecting the region's agricultural and mining production to foreign markets, and giving rise to an unprecedented export boom. Capital flowed from more developed countries through Latin America's port cities and along its newly constructed railways, which now connected land in the countryside to markets outside the region. As the global North underwent a second wave of industrialization, its banks often had excess capital to profitably invest in countries willing to pay higher interest rates. Geographical and resource restraints generally led each country to concentrate on a few activities. Revenues from the export of coffee, beef, bananas, sugar, wheat, fibers, copper, nitrates, iron, and silver circulated through Mexico City, Tegucigalpa, Santiago, and Buenos Aires. Immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe sought higher incomes in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil. And immigrants from the Middle East became prosperous merchants and then leading industrialists in Honduras,

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Mexico, Brazil, and Peru. Throughout the region, the urban middle classes expanded, as peasants were either expelled from their traditional communal lands and proletarianized on agro-export plantations or sought work in growing cities. In many countries throughout this period, the armed forces were a political actor frequently allied with civilian sectors.

The financial crisis of 1929 sparked a shift in economic models in Latin America. The pattern of accumulation based on the exportation of natural resources and the importation of finished goods opened the way in many countries to what would later be referred to as import substitution industrialization (ISI). This new economy increased the ranks of the middle and working classes who sought to improve their living conditions and to participate in a politics more deeply inflected by the language of nationalism. Some militant peasant groups – many from indigenous communities being dispossessed by expanding *ladino* ranches, farms, and foreign-owned plantations – fought to reclaim their ancestral landholdings. As they struggled to socialize democracy, workers and peasants were often joined by the managerial classes, students, and reform-minded merchants. The traditional dominant classes, whose power derived from their large landholdings, pushed back. Economic growth continued, albeit unevenly. Often at the expense of the export sectors, homegrown industries flourished, boosted by a state that intervened in the economy through, for example, higher tariffs, non-tariff barriers, cheap credit, and multiple exchange rates. During World War II, Latin American manufacturing experienced tremendous growth, as the United States and Europe slowed their exports of finished goods and local industry stepped in to fulfill domestic demand.¹ The new economic era, however, continued in many countries to be accompanied by old political instability, often manifested in coups d'état led by the armed forces (to mention only the countries studied in this volume: Brazil 1930; Argentina 1930 and 1943; Bolivia 1936 and 1943; Guatemala 1930 and 1944; Peru 1930; Chile 1932; El Salvador 1931 and 1944).²

The ISI reached its apogee in the 1950s. The local industries that developed under this model rarely achieved the scale or quality needed to compete in international markets. Dependence on a few key exports, moreover, had left the region vulnerable to price shifts and currency fluctuations. ISI prompted two types of reaction. Nationalists called for policies of “macroeconomic populism,” including state ownership of industries and price controls. Free-market liberals, in contrast, prescribed a dramatic reduction in state intervention in the economy and open trade. Nor was this period exempt from military coups. In many countries in the

region, the armed forces continued to be a relevant political actor, whether as a referee between different sectors of civil society or as a de facto party with the capacity to impose through arms its own political project (the 1950s saw coups in Bolivia 1951; Brazil 1955; Argentina 1955; Guatemala 1954; Honduras 1956).

Both in what was coming to be called the “First World” and in the socialist bloc, the 1960s were characterized by vigorous economic growth. Threatened by competition that could potentially offer a command economy, whose maximum model was the USSR, capitalists sought to expand their power. It was in these years that national frameworks began to be conceived by the US and European powers as brakes on capitalist development.³ In Latin America, this conception was made manifest with the creation, in 1960, of the Latin American Free Trade Association and the Central American Common Market. However, these regional economic markets soon showed that they could be influenced by multinational companies. This age of the prominence of transnational capital was likewise marked by military interruptions of the constitutional order (Argentina 1962 and 1966; Bolivia 1964 and 1969; El Salvador 1960 and 1961; Honduras 1963; Peru 1962 and 1968; Brazil 1964).

From the mid-1960s onward, coups d'état in Latin America began to have more ambitious objectives than in the past. This was due both to the warming of the Cold War following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, to which we will return, and to a change in the armed forces' self-perception of their role in society. As far as the economy was concerned, in these years many military leaders became convinced that their institutions had better qualified men than the civilian populations to promote economic and social development, whose success, they believed, would be a good antidote to the seduction that communism could exert.⁴

A successful attempt to alter the capitalist order would paradoxically have an unexpected impact on Latin America and would show to what extent the idea of the “Third World” encompassed different national situations. This attempt came about when the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), created in 1960, made the decision to restrict oil deliveries and multiply the price of oil several times at the end of 1973, in retaliation against Western countries that supported Israel in the Fourth Arab–Israeli War or Yom Kippur War.⁵ The strong dependence upon variables beyond the control of Latin America's governments once again revealed the fragility of the region's economies. In this case, two consequences followed for Latin America. Due to the global slowdown in economic growth that ensued, the first was the drop

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in demand for food and raw materials, its main exports. This accelerated an inflationary process in many countries which, in the case of Argentina, led in 1975 to the first hyper-inflationary experience in the country's history. The second consequence was even more far-reaching. Due to the rapid conversion of a group of so-called Third World countries into "world-scale super-millionaire" nations, an exceptional overabundance of capital at accessible interest rates was easily coupled with the need to attract capital to the subcontinent.⁶ The ambitions of military officers to restructure their societies were heightened by easy access to capital markets, enabling their regimes to engage in all-out wars against anything they saw as threatening to Western and Christian civilization and to the capitalist order. Counter-insurgency theory, by now sacred scripture among officers, counseled the judicious application of stick and carrot; in extreme cases, such as that in El Salvador, forced disappearances were thus coupled with land reform. In sum, although their final objectives were similar, the military coups of the 1970s came in two valances, repressive and reformist (with coups in Bolivia 1978 and 1979; Argentina 1976; Honduras 1972; El Salvador 1979; Chile 1973; Uruguay 1973).

The financial boom of the mid-1970s was, however, short-lived. The indebtedness of many countries in those years rippled into successive debt crises in the 1980s. The unaffordable public – and in many cases also private – indebtedness of several Latin American countries conditioned the construction of new democracies in the Southern Cone. Meanwhile, the focus of the Cold War shifted to Central America, where Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador were convulsed by revolutionary and counter-revolutionary attempts to transform largely agrarian economies and societies. The end of the Cold War weakened import-substituting industrialization and ushered in a new economic model based on the pro-market policies of what would become known as the Washington Consensus, characterized by deregulation of the labor market (and, in Central America, the carving out of "free trade" zones exempt from national laws) and the privatization of public assets, including utilities, to deal with the region's mounting debt crisis. The coups of the 1980s were the last of the Cold War (Bolivia 1980; Guatemala 1982).

COLD WAR LATIN AMERICA

Beginning in 1944, countries throughout Latin America undertook dramatic steps toward democratization. From Honduras to Brazil, unions

were allowed to organize and the franchise was expanded. Meanwhile, fresh from the victory over fascism in Europe and determined to defend its hemisphere from the spread of communism, the United States sought to consolidate dominance over capitalist markets and began brokering bilateral military agreements with governments throughout the region.⁷

Guatemala, in particular, was a hotspot for Cold War tensions in Latin America, with the first Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-orchestrated coup on the subcontinent. Historically, the country had been a puppet state for the United States, with the powerful United Fruit Company dominating the economy. However, in the mid-1950s, Guatemala became a security concern for the US, as Cold War paranoia began to color its views of the region. Although less intense than after the Cuban Revolution, the coup in Guatemala demonstrated how US views could be shaped by Cold War fears in Latin America and around the world.

In early 1950s Guatemala, neither civilians nor the military were inclined to overthrow the government of President Jacobo Árbenz. While the United Fruit Company certainly shaped the perceptions of US policymakers, under the Eisenhower administration, the United States had independent access to good intelligence on the ground and was alarmed by the influence of local communists. The US was piqued by Árbenz's efficacy. Whereas his predecessor, Juan José Arévalo, had strong social democratic principles, it was Árbenz who put these principles into action, efficiently implementing the most sweeping agrarian reform program in Central America, with the support of the communists in the Partido General de Trabajadores and with the military under his civilian command. Whatever Árbenz's political leanings, the Guatemalan army was decidedly not communist – and the US knew this. Rather, it was loyal to Árbenz and nationalistic. Hence a mix of imperial hubris, economic interests, and security concerns led the United States to conclude that Guatemala's example of democratic reformism pursued by a government with communist sympathies was intolerable and had to be reversed before El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua followed suit.⁸ While PBSUCCESS, the CIA's operation to overthrow Árbenz, failed to penetrate the armed forces, it succeeded in convincing the Guatemalan army that if the rebel force led by Lieutenant Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas failed, then the United States would intervene militarily. Fear of US intervention, in the end, prompted the armed forces to betray their president, sparing themselves and the country a greater humiliation. The 1954 coup ushered in a civil war that claimed the lives of 200,000 Guatemalans, tens of thousands of whom were indigenous Mayas.

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Ernesto “Che” Guevara, a young medical student from Argentina, witnessed the US-backed coup and would later vow that “Cuba will not be Guatemala.”

The 1954 coup against Árbenz marked the end of a period of US nonintervention and the beginning of a new one that would be shaped by the Cuban Revolution. Riding a massive wave of popular discontent in Cuba, Fidel Castro led a small group of young guerrillas, including Guevara, to battle dictator Fulgencio Batista (1940–4, 1952–9). On January 1, 1959, the insurgents marched through the streets of Havana, where they were received by excited and hopeful crowds. In 1961, as Castro’s government began nationalizing various industries, directly affecting several US companies, the United States suspended diplomatic relations with Cuba and began a policy of extreme economic coercion to oust Castro. While the US refused to purchase Cuban sugar, the Soviet Union announced that it would purchase 700,000 tons of it, the full amount that the United States had cut. A year later, the Cuban Revolution embraced Marxist-Leninist doctrine, inaugurating a new phase in the Cold War throughout Latin America. That same year, the United States and the Soviet Union were on the brink of nuclear war over the missiles the US had in Turkey and that the USSR had in Cuba. In a tense standoff that lasted nearly two weeks, the two superpowers negotiated the removal of warheads from both locations. The United States agreed to “respect the inviolability of Cuba’s borders and its sovereignty” and pledged “not to interfere in its internal affairs.”⁹

The impact of the Cuban Revolution on Latin America was so significant that some mark it as the beginning of the Cold War proper in the subcontinent.¹⁰ Regardless of the political regimes that organized Latin American societies, the *sine qua non* for the United States was that the region’s socioeconomic models should not acquire a communist character. From both ends of the political spectrum, the conflicts internal to Latin American societies came to be seen through the prism of the bipolar global confrontation. On the left, the influence of the Cuban Revolution was “devastating,” as expressed later by an Argentine protagonist of the New Left who stopped looking for a model in the USSR and began to look for one in the Caribbean.¹¹ On the right, the Castro regime served as a lightning rod for conservative forces throughout the hemisphere, strengthening the political leadership of the armed forces and frightening conservative sectors and their economic elites. The Cuban Revolution did what Árbenz in Guatemala had never attempted to do: It Latin Americanized the Cold War.¹² The United States soon directed its attention

to the region with unprecedented intensity, while Cuba attempted to export the revolution throughout the subcontinent, which deepened already existing divisions within various Latin American societies.

By March 1961, President John F. Kennedy summed up the situation in the hemisphere as well as anyone when he unveiled a new policy in response to the Cuban Revolution: “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.” This conviction led the Kennedy administration to launch, in March 1961, a political strategy specifically for Latin America, the Alliance for Progress. Intended to last ten years, this policy consisted in US economic, political, and social assistance to Latin America. Through multilateral financial agencies, such as the Inter-American Development Bank and other US-based aid agencies and the private sector, the program projected an investment of \$20 million. All member countries of the Organization of American States approved the official text of the Alliance for Progress at the Punta del Este conference in August 1961. Whereas the United States had seen in Árbenz’s agrarian reform program the telltale signs of the communist machinations of the Soviet Union, now the US explicitly backed economic reforms (including land reform) as the best means to avert the spread of communism.

Although the Alliance for Progress purported to foster democratic governments in the region, priority was given to economic development, converting democracy into a secondary concern. This devaluation of democracy was further accentuated by the professionalization of the armed forces, which transformed how these military institutions saw themselves within their respective societies. Throughout the 1960s, the militaries in many Latin American countries ceased to be vehicles of political groups that were incapable of coming to power through democratic means – in societies that, for that very reason, have been described as “praetorian” – and they began to perceive themselves as above political factions.¹³ Sharing with the US Department of State the diagnosis that the Cold War could intensify in the region as a consequence of the Cuban Revolution, the role of the armed forces shifted from doing the bidding of particular sectors to safeguarding the nation from any transformation that might follow the Cuban example. The conflict scenario changed substantially: From preparing for an eventual war with neighboring countries over territorial disputes, the region’s militaries began to focus on an unconventional war within their borders for ideological reasons.

Further consequences of this professionalization included the fostering of internal institutional cohesion, an investment in training and

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technology, the signing of bilateral military agreements with the United States, and an understanding of contemporary “social problems.” Authoritarianism now had a new kind of justification, associated with the pursuit of development and the idea that the military was at the forefront of social and economic progress. The coups d'état in Bolivia (1964), Brazil (1964), and Argentina (1966) are emblematic examples of the pairing of economic modernization and military authoritarianism.

Military control of Latin American states transformed notions of national security, which had been understood as providing for the security of the citizens of a nation, to resting on the achievement of a more fundamental security, that of the state, which only the military could protect. This conception, which came to be known as the Doctrine of National Security, replaced the external enemy (the governing assumption of the armed forces up until then) with the internal enemy. Within this doctrine, just as it was up to the United States to fight the Soviet Union, Latin American nation-states had to confront local agents of communism. Military officers applied this notion of the internal enemy not only to guerrilla organizations, Marxist or not, but also to individuals or groups who they deemed real or potential allies of Soviet or Cuban communism. The consolidation and dissemination of this doctrine was furthered by the ideological and military instruction received at the School of the Americas.

The US Army operated the School of the Americas, which it established in 1946, out of the US-controlled Panama Canal Zone until 1984, when it was moved to Fort Benning, Georgia. The School was created to train military personnel from Latin America, and it focused on counterinsurgency and combat skills that fell under the umbrellas of joint, special, and civil–military operations.¹⁴ Over the years, the School came under increasing public scrutiny, as many of its former graduates became notorious violators of human rights. For example, nearly all of the military officers involved in General Augusto Pinochet's overthrow of Chilean President Salvador Allende in 1973 had been trained by the US Army. Between 1946 and 2001, the School of the Americas trained more than 60,000 military personnel from Latin America.

The School fostered cooperation among the region's militaries, and its graduates carried out significant acts of international terrorism. The UN Truth Commission report on El Salvador found that forty-eight out of the sixty-nine members of the Salvadoran military whom it studied for human rights violations were alumni of the School.¹⁵ Peace activists came to refer to the School of the Americas as the “School for Dictators.” Several of its alumni went on to become military rulers: General

Manuel Noriega and General Omar Torrijos of Panama; Major General Guillermo Rodríguez of Ecuador; Peruvian Major General Juan Velasco Alvarado; and six others, two from Argentina, two from Bolivia, and two from Honduras. Through the School of the Americas, the United States influenced the repressive apparatus of Latin American states, enabling the use of proxy forces to suppress social and political groups that could impinge on US interests.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in some cases – in Argentina, for instance – the School of the Americas primarily provided ideological, rather than tactical, support. The “anti-subversive” practices implemented in Argentina were learned from French counterinsurgency manuals developed in Algiers.¹⁷

Some of the military regimes of the late Cold War coordinated the persecution and elimination of those they considered their internal enemies. This coordination was given the name “Plan Cóndor,” which can be read as a metaphor for the anti-communist voraciousness that flew over the subcontinent and found its prey without regard for national borders. The plan was created in November 1975 in Chile, in a security meeting presided over by the Chief of Secret Police, Manuel Contreras, with the participation of military officers from Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Brazil, and Argentina. This system of combined persecution and repression enabled local security agencies to move between participating countries and assured impunity for crimes committed through this framework of international military cooperation. One of the notable victims of the plan was Orlando Letelier, former minister of President Salvador Allende, assassinated in Washington in 1976. While the role of the United States government in Plan Cóndor has not been proven in court, scholars and human rights organizations have assembled convincing evidence that implicates US agencies, especially the CIA and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.¹⁸

The collaboration between dictatorships through Plan Cóndor should not, however, lead us to think that there were no disagreements or frictions between them. The most emblematic of these was the path to war that Generals Jorge R. Videla and Augusto Pinochet took at the end of 1978 in the Beagle Channel, south of Patagonia. The intervention of the Vatican managed to get both regimes to pull back. A few years later, the war between the United Kingdom and Argentina over the Falkland/Malvinas Islands regenerated friction between the Argentine and Chilean dictatorships. The Argentine military worried that Chile could take advantage of this moment to annex its southern territories. The Pinochet regime, for its part, lent intelligence and conducted distracting